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Things We'd Rather You Not Say on the Web, Or Anywhere Else

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Following George Carlin's death last month, China Beat got to thinking about his "seven dirty words" and what those same "seven words" might be in China. We invited David Bandurski of China Media Project to write a satirical piece in the style of Carlin, riffing on this idea of banned words in China.
By David Bandurski

I love words. And I thank you in advance, dear citizens, for obeying mine. Words are dangerous and slippery things. Some people in the West will tell you that words are playthings, and that we should all be free to do with them as we please. But I want to tell you that words are really all we have – and this is why the Party has troubled itself to choose them so carefully on your behalf.

You will have heard, I suppose, that Article 35 of our nation's constitution guarantees that you enjoy "freedom of expression." You will no doubt agree, however, as a matter of moral principle, that responsible citizens must enjoy all things in moderation. No good can come of enjoying words too much – and this is why we have taken it upon ourselves to parcel out this freedom, so that all Chinese can enjoy words with more or less equal moderation.

Comrade Mao Zedong once said, "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun." But words too are powerful. It is not my intention to spook you, dear citizens, but we must all remember the way that too many words under the policy of "glasnost" – a Russian word whose direct translation is "chaos" – spelled the end of the Soviet Union.

We must not forget – and this begins with not remembering – how Zhao Ziyang said on May 6, 1989, in the midst of popular demonstrations, that propaganda leaders should "open things up just a bit." "There is no big danger in that," he said. His words were careless, and the end result was chaos. Nobody wants chaos. Just try to picture what it does to GDP.

Comrade Zhao, you see, failed to understand the real power of words. He failed to understand that the Party and the masses must not be too profligate with them if they are to "do the great work of socialism with Chinese characteristics." That is why the Party had to step in afterwards to reorder your words and ideas. We have our own word for this: "guidance of public opinion." Say it with me: "guidance of public opinion."

Good. Now, dear citizens, I think it is best to instruct you with a couple of examples of what I mean about words. This way you will understand how to use them with responsibility and care, correctly upholding – say it with me – "GUIDANCE of PUBLIC OPINION." Right. I hope these examples will help you remember how to forget the right things.

There are more than 40,000 characters in the Chinese language. Fortunately, basic literacy requires only about three to four thousand of these words, which makes it much easier for us to keep an eye on the ones that matter. The most important thing is not the characters themselves, but rather how they are put together. Words are like chemicals. You have to mix them carefully. I'm sure you would agree that's just good science.

Take, for example, the character for "people," min (民). When we place it behind the character for "person," ren (人), we get a very nice word that means generally "the people." We can use it in sentences like, "The Party cannot do without the people and the people cannot do without the Party," in which the Party and the people are more or less interchangeable.

On the other hand, if we take this harmless character min, and place behind it the character for "host" or "master," zhu (主), the result, "democracy," is a dangerous discharge that upsets the harmony of

our first sentence. One simple character rips the Party and the people apart. We must not let words come between us, dear citizens.

This word, “democracy,” is a perilous word that must be handled with great care. The only ones we can trust to use “democracy” safely are trained Party scholars. They are able to neutralize the word by sealing it up in proper contexts. Phrases like “intra-Party democracy” and “developing socialist democratic politics” are some of the more advanced ways the Party has managed to quarantine this word and keep all of you safe. On the Web, we have more sophisticated technical means of protecting you – by blocking, for example, searches of words like “constitutional democracy.”

We are constantly improving our technical and other means of fighting dangerous words so that your thoughts and ideas [can be healthier](#). But we do need your help and cooperation. This is a “people’s war” on vocabulary, and our enemies are spilling off the tongues of the West.

Still, if we use words like “democracy” at the discretion of the finer minds in the Party, this can sometimes help promote international harmony. In my report to the 17th Party Congress last year, I used the word “democracy” in a safe context more than 60 times. Hearing the word so often, Western media got a bit over-excited. Their words for us were kind and harmonious.

“Harmony.” Now that’s a nice word. What should you say to help you fend off dirty words like “democracy”? That’s right: “Harmony.” Say it with me: “Harmony.”

“Harmony” packs quite a punch for such a small word. It muffles socio-economic problems of all kinds, most of which have arisen from the last decade of reforms.

Let’s just say you’re eaten up with words about how you were kicked off your farmland to make room for a big shopping mall that lined your local Party secretary’s pockets. The Party deals proactively with such issues by stepping back and taking a birds-eye view of your grievances. We call this the “scientific view of development.” I don’t want to get bogged down in details – the Party prefers economy of words. But basically, we are working toward a “moderately well-off” and “harmonious society” where you can afford to buy Fendi at your neighborhood shopping mall.

Of course, a “harmonious society” can only be achieved by dint of hard work. No one can get anything done when faced with constant distractions. I urge you to keep your voice down and be “harmonious.” I know that’s easier said than done. And that is why the Party lends a hand, “harmonizing” news, blogs, chatrooms and any other places where words tend to cause trouble.

“Harmony” is one of my favorite words. It reminds us that the only way we can give proper and “scientific” attention to solutions is by drowning out the noise of nagging problems.

There are many words we’d rather you not say or enjoy publicly, especially as the Olympic Games draw nearer. But you need not worry yourself over this. The Party has put numerous measures in place to ensure that you are free to make the right word choices. Sometimes, as your options are managed, you may feel at a loss for words – and really that is OK. After all, so long as your tongue is tied, we have no reason to bind your hands.

David Bandurski is a free-lance journalist and a scholar at the [China Media Project](#), a research program of the Journalism & Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong.